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May 11, 1942

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS 1942

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†"The Walking Gentleman" opened Thursday, May 7th, at the Belasco Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"The Walking Gentleman"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
May 8, 1942

"The Walking Gentleman," With Victor Francen, At the Belasco

"The Walking Gentleman," drama by Grace Perkins and Fulton Oursler. Produced by Albert Lewis and Marion Gering at the Belasco Theatre, New York, May 7, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

IN "The Walking Gentleman" at the Belasco Mr. and Mrs. Fulton Oursler would tell you the strange story of Basil Forrest, who was a bad actor, on and off. He specialized as a strangler of women who reminded him of his first wife. Not because he had hated his first wife, but because he had loved and lost her.

Now this may seem rather a far-fetched idea to you, but to the Ourslers and their psychiatrist friend, Dr. Blake, it is perfectly understandable. It was, I think they said, Basil's defense mechanism that was at fault.

In telling the story the Ourslers have no trouble in holding the attention of the larger part of their audience. They are practiced story tellers. Their combined output of plays, novels, short stories and picture scenarios would stock a Hollywood library and probably does.

But, being plot rather than character conscious, they do have trouble working up a definite interest in their stage people. Both the writing and the playing are too deliberate, and seldom convincing.

From Pre-War France

The impression is also strengthened by the fact that Victor Francen, an experienced and gifted Frenchman, is playing Basil, the actor, also with conscious deliberation.

Which results in your being much more interested in the way M. Francen plays his part than you are in the part he plays. A deft and insinuating strangler he may be, but never a fascinating one.

It is a bit difficult to cotton to the heroine, too. She is Doris, and after she had been married to Basil Forrest for three years she simply could not stand him any longer. He was gentle, he was kind, but also he was frightfully dominating. You know what that means to a heroine.

Doris left Basil and went to work for Dr. Blake, who could see right away what was wrong: Doris would never be happy, or of much use around the office, until she forgot Basil and married him.

Dr. J. and Mr. H.

The whole thing came to a head when Basil came to town with a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" troupe and hanged his leading lady in her dressing room. Then he got Doris, who used to be an actress herself, to play the part, and he would finally have finished off Doris too, if——

But that is the Ourslers' story. It has been well staged by Albert Lewis and Marion Gering and attractively set by Harry Horner. Ariene Francis did her serious best for Doris. Clay Clement, as clever a man as ever walked out of police headquarters, is the detective fellow, and good at it.

Richard Gaines, who has in his time played a couple of American presidents, Lincoln and Wilson, and very well, too, is submerged in the flat part of Dr. Blake.

There is a tiny bit for Margery Maude, a tinier bit for Oscar Polk and a few words for Clarence Derwent. A short part for Toni Gilman and a shadow part for Lew Hearn.

But I'm afraid "The Walking Gentleman" does not add up to enough to pay its way until it gets into pictures. They could use it on the Coast.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
May 8, 1942

Slow Death

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

THE central character in "The Walking Gentleman" is a homicidal actor, equally deadly in his propensity for quoting Shakespeare and his tendency to strangle women who have the misfortune to look like his estranged wife. A fellow both merry and psychopathic, he is witty, urbane, romantic, conscious of his great masculine charm and given to knotting his nooses about the necks of an assorted number of random girls. Although he is smiling, casual and rather informal about his slaughters and seems a picture of bland self-confidence, he is, it seems, a blazing furnace within and, when he kills, the one sign of his inner turbulence is that he perspires like any less assured killer. That is his weakness, as Fulton Oursler points out in his new melodrama.

* * *

If you are up on your stage assassinations, you will recall that Mr. Oursler wrote one of the classic murder melodramas, a fascinating mystery play called "The Spider." Now, in "The Walking Gentleman," he and his wife, Miss Grace Perkins, have hit upon another good idea for a lethal narrative, and their current work has the makings of a brilliant thriller. Something, however, seems to have gone wrong with the proceedings. Where everything should be tense, ominous and sinister, an atmosphere of combined parlor comedy and psychological study, completely devoid of thrills, hovers placidly over the Oursler narrative, making it seem one of the quietest and least perilous adventures of the season.

In a way, it is quite a feat, of a dubious nature, to take a play wth such promising things in it and make it so unexciting. The materials of "The Walking Gentleman" are not unlike those of "Angel Street," and yet, while the English work proves to be a genuine masterpiece of its school, the American work is adept only in withdrawing all the possible excitement from its easy-going narrative. Here are murder, madness, jealousy, suspicion, a terrified wife, an evil husband and a friendly, agreeable detective all tossed together in a most promising concoction that turns out to be a tasteless and curiously unexhilarating dish for the eager murder-story fans. An attempt to mix it with a back-stage episode is by no means life-saving.

* * *

Neither the slow-paced direction nor most of the acting helps. As the homicidal gentleman of the title, Victor Francen, an actor of standing in pre-war France and present-day Hollywood, seems so intent on projecting his debonair leading-man charm that he has little time to devote to the more sinister side of the character he is making so dashing. As the psychiatrist, who is nominally the hero of the evening, Richard Gaines, going to another extreme, takes what slight romantic interest there might be away from his role by giving a performance reminiscent of some priggish pre-Massey Morell. Miss Ariene Francis is slightly more successful as the heroine and the best of them all by many degrees is Clay Clement as the detective. "The Walking Gentleman" belongs among the disappointments.

NEW YORK POST
May 8, 1942

"The Walking Gentleman" Saunters Into the Belasco

By WILELLA WALDORF

AFTER the success of "Angel Street," it was inevitable that at least one more suave but deadly homicidal maniac should find his way to Broadway this season.

"Angel Street," however, need have no fear of serious competition from "The Walking Gentleman," the new thriller produced last night at the Belasco.

Written in the lush, seductive style of the more flamboyant magazine serials, this oppressive melodrama by Mr. and Mrs. Fulton Oursler achieves neither the distinction nor the suspense of "Angel Street."

Only a highly impressionable and unsophisticated audience could be expected to refrain from laughing at several of "The Walking Gentleman's" more impressive effects. Whoever thought of showing the customers an over-size shadow of the leading lady's corpse hanging from her dressing room door as a snappy wind-up to Act 1 provided one of the more comic episodes of an evening by no means devoid of snickers.

The Fascinating Strangler

"The Walking Gentleman"—the title is a theatrical term for a well-dressed super—concerns the unfortunate mental state of a stage star who has become unbalanced since his wife and former leading lady left him three years before. He keeps seeing women who remind him of her, and he strangles them, one after another.

An astute detective named Savage has finally got on his trail as the play begins, but he has no tangible evidence. The ex-wife, an emotional wreck, has been treated successfully by Dr. Blake, a noted psychiatrist, and is not only acting as his office assistant but is about to marry him. Then the police begin asking questions, and the famous actor happens to be rehearsing "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in a Broadway theatre.

The first act of "The Walking Gentleman" holds a certain interest during a backstage scene at the rehearsal, but it is elaborately overdone at the end, and the two acts that follow are not only laborious but sometimes embarrassingly inept.

Victor Francen's Broadway Debut

Victor Francen, the French stage and screen actor who has the misfortune to make his Broadway debut in this trying affair, suffers under the burden of a role that requires him to be continually described as a devastating creature whose fascination is overpowering. No woman can resist his Gallic insouciance, his seductive charm. When not committing murder, he is an oomph man.

Mr. Francen constantly gives the impression that he is not actually as much of an ass as the role makes him appear, and even manages to get through the innumerable quotations from Shakespeare without sounding as foolish as he might. "The Walking Gentleman," however, is the sort of play that insists upon conveying the fact that its leading character is an actor by having him spout excerpts from the Bard on every occasion. There's nothing even faintly subtle about any of it.

Ariene Francis as the emotionally torn wife who is about to marry the psychiatrist but is still strangely stirred by her ex-mate, the artistic strangler, seems quite out of her element, and Richard Gaines can do little for the doctor beyond making him a dull sort of stick, which he is.

Clay Clement plays the persistent detective in the usual easy-going rumpled-suit style, and a large company of character people is pretty much wasted in infinitesimal roles. Clarence Derwent as the theatrical producer seems dispirited, and no wonder..

"The Walking Gentleman"

NEW YORK SUN
May 8, 1942

'The Walking Gentleman,' Murder Drama, Is Offered At the Belasco

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

AS WRITERS of murder stories go, Grace Perkins and Fulton Oursler are almost transparently honest folk and when they point out a suspect you can safely take them at their word. So there is not a red herring in the three acts of "The Walking Gentleman," which Miss Perkins and Mr. Oursler—Mr. and Mrs. Oursler, really—wrote and which was presented at the Belasco Theater last evening.

Not expecting this sort of treatment from writers of murder yarns, I was left high and dry at the end, with a rather choice collection of entirely useless suspicions. There was the doctor, for example, and it was hard to believe that the doctor wasn't too good to be true. One of the detectives behaved oddly from time to time and a theater manager who was rather absently mixed up in the proceedings aroused in this suspecting mind, accustomed to the artful tricks of mystery writers, some twinges of uneasiness. But all the time the man who had strangled four young women and was threatening a fifth was just the mad actor at whom the authors were pointing with all the fingers of their four hands.

Probably there is no fair quarrel with this, since the authors do not actually pretend that "The Walking Gentleman" is a guessing game. It is merely a straightforward, often exciting and now and then chilling story of an actor with a French accent who is unsettled when his wife leaves him and finds surcease in strangling young women who look like her. He strangles one almost before our eyes during a rehearsal and there are nervous moments when it seems that the heroine is as good as done for. How, ingeniously, she avoids throttling and how the easy-going detectives trap their villain you may learn at the Belasco, not in these columns.

It is all written down with skill and adeptly acted, and when the madman hides in a closet to await his unsuspecting prey you will shiver and shake. Only if you ask that one more trick up the sleeve will "The Walking Gentleman" seem, at the end, a little flat—seem to fall somewhere between the psychological horror sketch and the proper mystery, so missing two of melodrama's favorite stools.

Victor Francen, making his American debut, is admirably filled with Gallic menace; Arlene Francis is convincingly terrified and Richard Gaines makes the physician who loves and helps save the lady a friendly innocent, which is what the authors intended. (I still find it hard to believe.) The others in the cast are excellent and Harry Horner's settings are handsome and remarkably commodious. The title is theater for an extra in dress clothes, and seems to have nothing in particular to do with the play. Mr. Oursler is "Anthony Abbot," and used to write mystery novels himself, and good ones.

'THE WALKING GENTLEMAN'

A melodrama in three acts by Grace Perkins and Fulton Oursler; staged by Marion Gering; settings by Harry Horner; lighting by Feder; presented at the Belasco Theater on May 7, 1942, by Albert Lewis and Mr. Gering. The cast:

Mrs. Shriver	Margery Maude
Doris	Arlene Francis
Dr. Gerald Blake	Richard Gaines
Miss Marshall	Ruth Thea Ford
Savage	Clay Clement
Frazier	George Spaulding
Sam Burns	Clarence Derwent
Jim Lake	Cledge Roberts
Electrician	Roderick Maybee
Elsie	Margo Railton
Newcome	Ross Chetwind
Connie	Jane Forbes
Lanyon	David Stewart
Poole	A. J. Herbert
Marmot	Oscar Polk
Basil Forrest	Victor Francen
Wrinkles	Lew Hearn
Myrtle Tracey	Toni Gilman
Officer Harris	Roderick Maybee

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
May 8, 1942

'Walking Gentleman' Presented at Belasco

Basil Forrest Appears in Melodrama by Grace Perkins, Fulton Oursler

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH an actor, Basil Forrest was so much in love with his wife that he went around strangling young women who resembled her, a peculiar and fatal habit which led him, after three acts of "The Walking Gentleman" at the Belasco last night, right into a pair of handcuffs.

It was in that moment that Basil nonchalantly lighted a cigarette he kept in his pocket against such emergencies, a poison cigarette from whose lethal fumes, presumably, Basil fell dead a few moments after the final curtain. He was pre-deceased at some distance, I thought, by "The Walking Gentleman."

For while the new melodrama written by Grace Perkins and Fulton Oursler (Mr. and Mrs. Oursler) is much, much better than the very sugar-cured performance indicates at the Belasco, it has its own defects, including two situations and several passages of dialogue which should be taken to a taxidermist and then stuck away in a museum.

With a little tinkering, re-writing, and some drastic recasting the Ourslers could probably have worked up a pretty good thriller (nothing to compare with Mr. Oursler's and Lowell Brentano's "The Spider" of course), but pretty good. As it is it is pretty bad.

The plot is neatly enough established when the authors show us Doris, Basil's former wife, rescued by an upright psychiatrist engaged to marry her. It is then that the fiendish, fascinating, etcetera Basil makes his appearance, deftly strangles another girl because she resembles Doris and we watch the tug of war and love between the two men for the somewhat unstable affections of the wayward Doris.

Lies to Save Him

When the police have Basil cornered Doris lies to save him, and Basil knows that she is his slave forever or "until," as he goes on saying, "death." The good doctor rescues her again, and then leaves her alone with the murderer on a pretext so flimsy (he might as well have gone out to do his Christmas shopping) that the audience giggled at the presumably thrilling climax and the play was finished if not over.

By a series of acute disasters in casting the emphasis is placed on the flapdoodle aspects of the play, and its weakest points are strenuously brought out by three rather dire performances in the central parts. When these are aggravated by the writing, by some lurid direction, and by such trashy doings as the first act curtain showing the shadow of a murder victim hanging on an off-stage stepladder you get the shudder drama at its silliest and a hair-raiser that is hopelessly stacombed.

Doubtless authors invite the sort of overacting they get at the Belasco when they write a character that is supposed to be devilish, irresistible, charming, dangerous, and all that. Though a note in the playbill says that Victor Francen "picked up the mantle of the late Lucien Guitry in the Paris Theatre," I imagine he must have checked it somewhere and lost the check, for when it comes to what the French so humorously call *jambon* the M. Francen slices enough in one performance to make sandwiches for the world's series. He seemed to admire himself so much that any other admiration might have seemed an intrusion.

Even so the portrait Richard Gaines provided of the good doctor seemed such a convention of stuffed shirts that almost any bright girl would have been justified in choosing an animate murderer instead of the week's laundry as spouse. But then Arlene Francis scarcely indicated that Doris was a bright girl, or even an intelligent one, so maybe the honors were even, if all blank.

Harry Horner has again obliged with some excellent scenery but "The Walking Gentleman" remains, I'm afraid, a dramatic hitchhiker whose thumbs, if they are anything like mine at the moment, are down.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
May 8, 1942

Proving That Murder Is Dull

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

YEARS ago in *The Spider* Fulton Oursler showed that he knew how to write a genuine thriller. In *The Walking Gentleman* he and his wife might have written another one; but with the utmost determination they have let every possible opportunity for good melodrama slip through their fingers. *The Walking Gentleman* is indeed, some kind of feat in reverse; it is hard to understand how it can be so talky, slow-moving and dull. One can only suppose that, instead of playing happily along with crime, the authors insisted on having a fling at something fancier.

The play deals with an actor who spends his spare time strangling women. On the stage of the Belasco, however, he does very little except converse with his former wife. The net that is closing round him seems to bother him very little, hence soon ceases to bother the audience either. From time to time the lady's fiancé makes half-hearted efforts to shoo the murderer away; and detectives frequently drop in, but only to depart again, presumably so sure that their quarry will go right on talking that they need be in no hurry to nab him. The former wife becomes half-hysterical, urging him to leave; but he, by this time all wound up with epigrams about love and quotations from The Bard, prefers to finish the conversation. It might still be all right if the talk had any vibrancy or wit, but the fellow is unfortunately as boring as he is bad.

For all its scorn of vulgar excitement, the play never reveals anything deep or unusual. In fact, we never even learn why the fellow went in for strangling. We only know that he got started early, since his first victim was his governess.

The direction and acting are no help to the proceedings. Victor Francen, who I am told is good in French films, is not impressive as the talking gentleman; nor is Arlene Francis anything but extremely intense as the wife. And Richard Gaines, who earlier this season came off well as Woodrow Wilson, seems rather at loose ends in the less historic role of the fiancé.